

Emily (Vecchi) Noble, “La Petite Emilie” (1886-1963)

Singer, dancer, child actress, aerialist, and trick bicycle rider, Emily Vecchi Noble **enchanted** audiences as she traveled throughout Europe and the Americas in circuses and on **vaudeville** stages. As principal soloist with the “La Petite Emilie Troupe,” she was considered to be “one of, if not the greatest lady trick cyclist in the world.” After performing for 24 years, she came to Bloomington to help found the Community Players and use her artistic talents in many of their productions.

Emily was born Emily Vecchi in London, England on February 4, 1886. Her father, Enrico, operated a hotel just a few blocks from the theatre district. At the age of six, she began taking dancing and singing lessons. Just two years later, she joined “The Ben Greet Players” and began playing children’s parts in Shakespearean plays. Ben Greet was a famous English tragic actor of the time, and this marked the beginning of Emily’s professional career. Soon she was traveling throughout Great Britain singing and dancing. Later she began performing in vaudeville and doing bicycle tricks. She worked and became friends with many of the great entertainers of the era such as **Charlie Chaplin** and Marie Dressler. She and Chaplin were said to have both performed in the opening show at the London **Hippodrome** on January 15, 1900.

That same year, Emily joined the “Kaufmann Bicycle Troupe.” Nick Kaufmann was considered the “most celebrated trick wheelman in the world.” The troupe had great success wherever it traveled, and was declared the “**acme** of skill and daring in exhibition bicycle riding.” Because Emily was only 14, the Kaufmann Troupe signed a contract guaranteeing her care and safe return home. With the troupe, Emily traveled extensively throughout Europe, Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Cuba. She became “Miss Emily, star of the Kaufmann Troupe.” Although it was a **nomadic** lifestyle, never staying in one place for very long, she made lifelong friends with many of her fellow performers.

In 1904, the Kaufmann Troupe joined the Ringling Brothers Circus. Here Emily met her future husband, Clyde Noble—a fellow circus performer and member of “The Flying Fishers,” a **trapeze** group. Ringling Brothers was unofficially known as the “Sunday School Show” due to its **wholesome**, family-oriented atmosphere. Young women were unable to interact with young men outside of their professional performances. Wherever she went, Emily was chaperoned. Breaking the rules meant that girls would be warned at first, then fined for the second offense, and if caught for a third and final time, **barred** from the show. This made it difficult for Emily and Clyde to develop their **budding** relationship. Later in life, Emily told of instances when Clyde would sneak her a box of candy as they passed each other on horseback in the lead-up to the show. She said she had to quickly hide it in her costume or suffer the **consequences**. On a few occasions, they were able to spend time together, though always with another couple, and with added supervision.

After two years with Ringling Brothers, the Kaufmann Troupe returned to traveling and performing all over the world on its own. Emily and Clyde maintained their long-distance relationship by writing letters to each other; and in 1908, while performing in Germany, Emily received an engagement ring from Clyde. The two were married upon her return to New York City on November 10, 1908.

Clyde Noble was from Bloomington, Illinois. Clyde followed his brother Charles into the circus. Charles had worked with Harry Green, a former schoolmate and a member of the “LaVan Brothers.” Harry and his brothers, Fred and Howard, before him are arguably the ones most responsible for helping establish Bloomington-Normal as a circus training ground, and influencing countless other individuals to become **aerialists** and join the circus. Clyde began

performing with his brother Charles in 1904. Charles and Clyde were both members of the Flying Fishers. When Clyde joined, the act was expanded to five members and became known as the “Five Flying Famous Fishers.” Clyde took control of the group following the death of his brother in 1908. It was during this time, when the group was performing with Ringling Brothers, that Clyde met Emily.

After their marriage, Clyde decided to give up “flying.” Instead, Emily, Clyde, and her two sisters formed a new group called “La Petite Emilie Troupe” that featured trick bicycling. Clyde managed and directed the group, and Emily was the principal solo rider and featured performer. They traveled with the Keith and Orphean Vaudeville circuit throughout the United States, but in 1911, Emily’s sisters decided to go back to England. Faced with reorganizing the act, Clyde decided to return to the trapeze, and resurrected The Flying Fishers. In 1912, while appearing in Minneapolis, the act announced they would soon open in the Empire Theatre in London. This booking was so successful that it lasted eight weeks. Clyde soon had contracts amounting to five years of **bookings** in Europe, but the outbreak of **World War I** in 1914 interfered. Clyde, Emily, and the rest of the act returned to the United States on the last **ocean liner** to leave Europe after the war began. They returned to traveling the vaudeville circuits and continued to perform their acts on stages throughout the U.S.

In 1918, after many years of nomadic living, Clyde and Emily decided to settle down and returned to Bloomington. Before he became **enthralled** by aerial acrobatics, Clyde had started as a jeweler’s apprentice for Frank T. Parritt. He returned to this trade, and took over Hormuth’s Jewelry store on the south side of the courthouse (now museum) square. Later he managed the jewelry department in The Newmarket, a department store located at the corner of Front and Center Street. After The Newmarket was sold to Montgomery Ward’s—another department store—the Nobles opened their own shop at 111 N. Center Street. Here they sold fine jewelry and diamonds, “guaranteed perfect, of fine color and full brilliancy,” until 1944 when Clyde sold the store and they retired again.

Emily and Clyde were active members in the community. They performed in many productions of the Community Players Theatre, which they had helped organize. They were important to this group both on and off stage, sometimes acting, sometimes directing, and frequently doing the make-up. Emily was particularly well known for her **comedic** roles.

Emily was also involved with the **Order of the Eastern Star**. This was the women’s **auxiliary** group to the Masonic Order, whose membership was restricted to men. Like the **Masons**, The Eastern Star was devoted to charity and promoting goodwill in the community. Over the years she served in a number of offices in the organization. She and Clyde were both members of the **First Church of Christ, Scientist** and the McLean County Country Club. Emily was president of the Women’s Auxiliary of the country club in 1924.

Clyde Noble died at the age of 72 in 1955. Emily survived another eight years, passing away on March 5, 1963. She lived a full and active life, traveling and performing around the world. During the second half of her life, she enriched the life of Bloomington-Normal and McLean County through commercial, civic, and social involvement. Emily is buried in Evergreen Cemetery next to her husband Clyde.

Discussion Question: If you could interview Emily about one part of her life, which part would you choose? What questions would you ask her?